

The University of Chicago

CHARLES CHAUNCY: COLONIAL
LIBERAL, 1705-1787

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY

JUNE, 1945

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CHAPTER IV

THE CASE AGAINST ENTHUSIASM

Moral and doctrinal apostacy were rampant in the churches of New England as the eighteenth century opened and increased in intensity until the Great Awakening ushered in a brief period of refreshing zeal for the things of the Spirit. An overwhelming majority of the inhabitants were of no religion and little success attended the efforts of the churches to arouse in them an interest in "the courts of the Lord." Not only were the churches failing to recruit new members but they were hard put to maintain what ground they had gained. In consequence of such spiritual darkness, the religious literature of the period is filled with lamentations and appeals to God that the purity and power of religion might be seen again in the land.

In the ringing denunciations of the times by the clergy, the people in general were acclaimed as being religiously illiterate, possessing little knowledge of God and His ways. Ungodliness marked the conduct of the professing members of the churches, expressing itself in irreligion, profaneness, contempt, pride, wantonness, intemperance, injustice, oppression, and knavery.¹ There was little regard for the Spirit in the matter of worship and it had become more an affair of custom, education, and selfish interest. A religious formalism, void of all life and spirit and missionary enterprise, had settled like a blight upon the New England churches.

Many of the sermons decried the growth of a materialistic and secular spirit among the people.

Does not God command men to attend to the salvation of their souls by labouring after a saving conversion to God, and growth in grace and holiness? How zealous men are for the things of the world. They live as if they had only bodies and no souls. Secularism has gained the day. We have forgotten our errand into the wilderness. Men are concerned not so much to be good as to be great, how they may live plentifully, easily, and honourably here; a private, narrow, selfish

¹William Williams, A Plea for God (Boston: B. Green, 1719), p. 8.



spirit is indulged.²

Discounting whatever exaggeration there may have been in the preaching of such sentiments, there was no doubt but that the minds of the people were more and more turned toward the material development of their environment and commercial pursuits. As the constituency of New England became more established in the New World, there occurred a shift in emphasis in their thinking from an unquestioned allegiance to the theocratic dream to the realities of their political economy. This resulted in not only a headache for the church fathers but in a modification of religious doctrine as well.

The growing apostasy was not only of an ethical nature but also had doctrinal implications. Some of the principle tenets of Calvinism were being questioned and denied. A somewhat Pelagian position was being assumed by those who held that there was "a power in fallen man by himself to perform true obedience to God, and that he needs not a new power and principle infused in him for it."³ Men were justified by Gospel obedience and inherent righteousness and not by the righteousness of Christ. It was making the way of salvation so plain that the natural man could easily see it and it was a way agreeable to the sentiments of men in their natural state. It was a poisonous and soul-damning principle wrapped up in sweet language.⁴ This was an Arminian principle and "another Gospel than what Christ and the Apostles had preached." It was a Gospel of free-will and self-sufficiency contrary to the orthodox doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God and the total depravity of man.

The answer to the laments of the New England Churches came suddenly in the form of a religious revival. A pietistic influence with its emphasis upon the personal aspect of Christianity had prepared the soil for this new and what proved to be a rather bewildering religious phenomenon. A more intense expression of reawakened interest in religion was first noticed in the parish of Jonathan Edwards in Northampton, Massachusetts. Possessing

²Ibid., p. 22.

³Samuel Willard, The Peril of the Times Displayed (Boston: B. Green and J. Allen, 1700), p. 28.

⁴John White, New England Lamentations (Boston: T. Fleet, 1734), p. 26.

what was to him a very real experience of the sovereignty of God, Edwards began to preach in such an insistent and awakening manner that others in his congregation soon shared his great concern for the things of salvation. His appeal assumed a more personal character as he met with small groups of people in their homes and discussed with them the problems that pertained to their salvation. Emotional fervor characterized the renewed interest in religion and spread like contagion from one community to the next. Something new had come upon the religious scene and it astonished the minds of men and excited the people.

The Great Awakening, however, brought division and controversy into the total picture of religious life in New England. Churches in New England soon divided over the question as to whether revivalism as such was a proper and valid instrument for the promotion of salvation and the growth of the churches. The "New Lights" favored the movement while the "Old Lights" frowned upon it. This earlier controversy possessed little doctrinal content and the argument was built largely around certain external practices of the movement. Representing the "Old Lights," Charles Chauncy opposed the Great Awakening by expressing his disapproval of revivalism as such, questioning its validity, and the religious experience that came out of its highly emotional program. As individual congregations divided over the revival issue, their quarrels were of a practical nature, centered around the possession of the church properties. Revivalism first presented a practical problem to the churches before the doctrinal implications became apparent.

Over and above the questions of practice, however, the Great Awakening brought about on the part of the churches in New England a more precise definition of their theological position. Over a period of years the formal "doing-business-as-usual" character of church life had resulted in neglect if not an actual shelving of certain theological tenets fundamental to Calvinism. There had actually taken place in the religious thought of New England a considerable indigenous development of and departure from the Calvinist expression of Christianity. The assumption on the part of Edwards and his disciples of a strict Calvinist position brought this trend to light and resulted in the formation of two theological parties, the "Old Calvinists" and the "Consistent Calvinists" or Edwardseans. The Great Awakening was not so much

the cause of this division as the occasion for it. It brought the churches face to face with certain theological questions that had to be answered. Religious thought in New England shifted from polity to doctrine. Inasmuch as the Edwardians by and large favored the revivals, the "New Lights" were largely represented in the party of "Consistent Calvinists" but there were many exceptions. Charles Chauncy's part in the theological controversy will be discussed in a later chapter.

No great amount of attention has ever been given to the arguments of those who opposed the Great Awakening. Yet the opposition has made a significant contribution to the total picture of revivalism in American Christianity. Those who opposed the movement did not hinder, in the main, this significant expression in the religious life of our land. They have served as a brake on a railroad car, retarding its progress, indeed, but making it only the more safely to reach its destination.⁵

Charles Chauncy was well qualified to lead the opposition to revivalism--a controversy fraught with emotional content. Although he was not always able to handle his own passions so well in face-to-face contacts, in his written works there was manifest utmost self-control. He was a man of character, of sterling honesty and Christian faith, and chose the more honored and respected method of opposition, that of disputation. This was conducted in a careful, learned, and sincere manner. Though without a doubt it was not his intention to do so, Chauncy actually did much to lay bare the heart of the revival movement. The true fruit of God's Spirit was effectively pictured as he thrust in the sickle of his critical, Biblical mind and cut away the thorns and thistles. True, in his wide sweeps, he may at times have pierced the heart but the wounds were not fatal. One cannot fully understand the first Great Awakening in American Christianity, with all of its ramifications, without hearing him speak.

In the controversy Chauncy held a favored position in that he had been introduced to a method of doubt and inquiry at Harvard which made his argument more objective. At the same time he understood far better than his opponents the power of positive assertion. He aspired after scholarly training. He preferred a

⁵E. N. Kirk, Lectures on Revivals (Boston: Congregational Publishing Society, 1875), p. 34.

broad to a sectarian theology. He adhered to rational methods of religious investigation, hating fanaticism in any shape or form. Chauncy placed emphasis upon the work of God's Spirit in the inner man and the fruit brought forth by such an influence. This made his position more attractive than that of many of the advocates of the revival who were prone to dwell upon the external nature of the movement. Those who favored the revival voiced their arguments too often in a negative manner which sapped their forcefulness. This is not strange for that is the way people thought about religion in those days.

Mr. Cooper in the preface to Jonathan Edwards' The Distinguishing Marks of the Spirit of God, wrote the following description of the "new face of things" in Boston:

Taverns, Dancing-Schools, and assemblies are much less frequented--Dress and apparel are reduced. Religion is much more the subject of conversation, than ever I knew it.--the doctrines of Grace are espoused and relish'd. Private religious meetings are greatly multiplied. The public assemblies are much better attended: and our auditories were never so attentive and serious. There is indeed an extraordinary appetite after the sincere milk of the Word.

Charles Chauncy had the following to say about the above external observations of the effects of the revival:

If Mr. Cooper had added that people were become more honest and just, and kind, and merciful, more punctual in their words, better neighbors, better relatives, that they bridled their tongues better and in general were more circumspect in their behaviour: this would have made the face of things beautiful indeed. . . .The "apostolical times" are hardly returned upon them in Boston. For those were times when such fruits as these abounded, love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness or courtesousness, goodness, faith or fidelity, meekness, temperance.⁶

As far as Chauncy was concerned, Boston might have put on a new face but he was deeply concerned as to whether Boston had a new heart. A new well-curb and the finest equipment for drawing water from the well would mean nothing if the water was impure. Chauncy did not align himself with those who called the revival a work of Satanic influences. He answered his opponents with an emphasis upon natural causes as explaining in a large measure the revivalistic phenomenon. The stress upon external manifestations did not impress Chauncy as proof that the movement was valid religiously. Jonathan Edwards had said, "It is notorious that the

⁶Chauncy, The Late Religious Commotions in New England Considered (Boston, 1743), p. 14.

Spirit that is at work takes off persons minds from the vanities of the world." Chauncy answered, "In a wrong way, yes! They neglect the proper business of their calling. They spend their time running after strange teachers and lay exhorters."

During the years 1741 and 1742 Charles Chauncy laid the groundwork for his principal publication against the Great Awakening.⁷ At the Boston Thursday-Lecture in June, 1741, he had preached upon conversion. The true Christian, he held, was a new creature and in a religious and moral sense a change was wrought in him, taking place in his inward frame of mind and expressing itself in Christian conduct.⁸ The whole inner man was altered. There was a change in the converted man's apprehensions. He saw everything in a different light. In his natural state he might have had a "notional" sight of the being and perfection of God, a mere speculative opinion about God. After conversion he had an inward sense and feeling of mind that there was a God, infinitely just and holy, wise and good.

Conversion also brought about a change in the purposes of life. They took on a religious nature, truly determined for God and holiness.⁹ The affections were changed. There was love for the things of God and Christ; sorrow for sins; hope for the better things of eternity; fear of God's displeasure. The converted man forsook his sinful ways and did his duty to God, neighbor, and himself. The maker of this new creature was the Holy Spirit of God.¹⁰ A new creature in Christ did not mean merely the restraints of education and conscience. Changed men became partakers of the nature of God, a likeness to the Divine Being in holiness and righteousness. The converted man was a workmanship of God.¹¹

The following repairs were made upon the ruins of the Old Creation: the image of God was "reinstamp'd" upon the soul; the confusion and disorder of the faculties were set to rights; light was put into the understanding; the will was made pliant and ductile; the affections were placed on proper objects; the passions were calm and quiet; the conscience was serene and placid; life was uniform and regularly conformed to the will of God and

⁷ Chauncy, Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England (Boston, 1743).

⁸ Chauncy, The New Creature Describ'd (Boston, 1741), p. 7.

⁹ Ibid., p. 9. ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 17. ¹¹ Ibid., p. 18.

the precepts of religion.¹²

In harmony with the general view, Chauncy was of the opinion that there were few converted men and women among the multitudes. He was as much aware of the great need for vital religion in New England as any man. The great thing necessary was for its constituency to experience a real and effectual renovation of heart and life. He parted company with the revivalists on their assumption that they possessed the secret and monopoly for producing such an experience as well as their emphasis upon particular ways of conversion.

The important thing to Chauncy was the belief that conversion was the work of the Divine Spirit. Actually how this was brought about was not important to him.¹³ He questioned whether the Spirit of God worked in a cut-and-dried fashion in the business of conversion. A person might be sanctified from childhood. He might never know where and when he became spiritually alive. By the blessing of God upon religious education and life in a Christian environment, the change might be almost indiscernible in respect to a definite time and place.¹⁴ The revivalists were making a great noise about the necessity of knowing the time and place of conversion. They were laying a great deal of emphasis upon external manifestations. Chauncy felt that this was misplaced emphasis and that the externals might well be accounted for by purely natural causes, mere products of enthusiasm.

Don't trouble yourself with fears and doubts about your conversion, merely because you can't relate the time and circumstances of it, with that particularity and exactness which some others may be able to do. Search your heart thoroughly to see whether you are indeed partakers of that new nature; that's the main thing.¹⁵

He did not deny the validity of conversion on the part of those who were able to relate the time and circumstances, but he denied them the right to demand that all conversion experiences conform to a particular pattern. Men had no right to limit God's way of working conversion in such an arbitrary manner.

The revivalist made much over the matter of assurance. To Chauncy this again was placing the emphasis upon a peripheral aspect of conversion. He referred his readers to Richard Baxter who had met with many Christians lacking positive assurance of

¹²Ibid., p. 18.

¹³Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 30.

their salvation. This fact was not fatal to Christianity. The Christian ought to be careful lest he place too much confidence in high raptures and feelings of comfort which some might possess. To the converted Chauncy said:

'Twas not by your own works of righteousness, but according to mercy, that God saved you by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Ghost. The new birth bringeth forth but babes. Beware of spiritual pride. Keep your zeal under the government of sound judgment. Keep your minds in a constant awareness of the vast importance of true Christian charity. Christian charity is a fundamental grace. Know your own station and act within your own sphere.¹⁶

Chauncy closed his lecture with a quotation from Bishop Hopkins: "Work as if you were to be saved by your own merits, and withal to rest on the merits of Christ, as if you had never wrought anything."

Later in the same year and on the occasion of another Thursday-Lecture, Chauncy spoke of the odiousness of an unbridled tongue on the part of Christians. To him rashness of speech on the part of an individual within the Church indicated that his religion was hypocritical and vain.¹⁷ A sanctified heart was the best preparation for a well-governed tongue. Chauncy was suspicious of all the talk about being religious on the part of many who had been touched by the revival. He disliked their spiritual pride and the censorious manner they assumed when they spoke of others who were outside the influence of the awakening.

In December of 1741 Chauncy delivered another lecture pertinent to the revivals in which he considered the diverse gifts granted to the Christian ministry.¹⁸ God did not carry on His work through his ministers in any particularly rigid pattern. The revivalists were offensive in the bold manner in which they assumed their way to be the very expression of God's Spirit, while the ways of other workmen of God they decried as vain. Chauncy disliked their attitude toward an educated ministry as if learning was unnecessary for an effective ministry. There was too much heat and strife in New England about ministers--some contending for one and others for another. There was too much of an itch after other preachers among the congregations with settled

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁷ Chauncy, An Unbridled Tongue (Boston, 1741).

¹⁸ Chauncy, The Gifts of the Spirit to Ministers (Boston, 1742).

pastors.¹⁹ People ought to be grateful for the diversity of gifts granted by God to His ministers. The congregations ought to encourage the improvement of these gifts rather than using them as occasions for quarreling.²⁰

The ministry was cautioned lest under the pretense of depending upon the Spirit, preparation in the use of study be neglected. Several particular gifts granted by God to His ministers were listed. Some were given the gift of "applying to men's understanding"; there was a vein of sound reasoning running through their discourses. There was the gift of moving the passions. This was a desirable gift. The human passions were capable of serving many valuable purposes in religion and might, to good advantage, be excited and warmed, providing they were kept under the restraint of reason. There was the gift of touching the consciences of sinners, not simply by moving the hearers to fear as the revivalists were prone to do, but above all by moving them to hopes. Alarm their fears to be sure but encourage their hopes. Special emphasis was laid upon the gift of speaking comfortably to distressed sinners. The lovingkindness of God in Jesus Christ was to be set before them that they might be drawn by love into the congregation of the righteous.²¹ Diligent attention to the cultivation and use of such gifts rather than contention over which was best would have served better the religious interests of the people.

On the thirteenth of May in 1742 a special day of prayer was observed by First Church, Boston, to call upon God for the effusion of His Spirit. Chauncy preached upon the doctrine of the Holy Ghost with particular emphasis upon the influence of the Spirit as an agent of conversion. It was a message complementary to the sermon on conversion treated above. In the beginning, he stated, the Holy Ghost had been given to men in an extraordinary manner as an open attestation of the truth of the Christian religion.²² Chauncy believed that the Spirit no longer worked in that manner. The more excellent way was that of charity and love,

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

²² Chauncy, The Out-pouring of the Holy Ghost (Boston, 1742), p. 7.

love of neighbor springing from love to God and a principle of faith in Jesus Christ. This was a way preferable to one of a miraculous nature. This was the ordinary influence of the Holy Ghost upon men's hearts.

The Holy Ghost is the beginner, the carrier on, the finisher offaith. . . . We may be ignorant of the manner of the Spirit's operation on the hearts of men but this is no argument against the reality of the thing. . . . God who has immediate access to our Spirits, can certainly work upon them, and, in a reasonable way, influence them both to will and do of his own pleasure.²³

The influence of God's Spirit does not violate the dignity of the human personality and will not result in all the noise and confusion that so largely characterized the revival. The Holy Ghost convicts men of sin and puts them upon the use of the instituted means of salvation.²⁴ The Spirit produces true Gospel faith in men. This is not a mere assent of the mind to Gospel truth although true faith always includes such an assent. "The Holy Ghost so produces this work upon the mind of the sinner, whereby, the eyes of his understanding being opened, he has such a view of the suitableness of the gospel method of salvation in general, of the loveliness of Christ in particular, his all-sufficiency to be his Saviour, as that he is persuaded and enabled to embrace him as such, giving himself up to him, to be instructed and governed, and saved by him."²⁵ Chauncy was no believer in the Calvinist doctrine of the impotence of man in the strictest sense. God did in no way violate man's freedom in the business of salvation, though He was the Author of conversion. God in the person of the Divine Spirit acted in and upon man in a way suited to their nature and in a way that agreed with their character as moral agents.²⁶

Converted men were changed men and the Holy Ghost brought this about.

This change is not the produce of meer reason, nor of external revelation. It is not bro't about by the bare influence of moral motives, whether they are fetched from the law or the Gospel; no, but it is an effect of the power of the Spirit working effectually in them that believe. It is not a change that can be accomplished by an act of free will. To create is the known prerogative of God. The new creature is the workmanship of God.²⁷

Chauncy had no quarrel with the revivalists in making God the

²³ Ibid., p. 11.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

Author of conversion but he resented the arbitrary way in which they said He brought it about. In fact Chauncy felt that men knew very little about how the Holy Ghost produced changed men. The revivalists assumed that they knew a great deal about this mysterious work of God and thereby made themselves judges of something beyond their comprehension.

Although it was largely a mystery as to just how the Holy Ghost influenced and converted men, Chauncy did make certain observations of the Spirit at work. Light was commanded to shine into the understanding. The enlightened understanding directed and governed the will. The will directed and governed the several affections of the soul and the powers of the body.

To say precisely how the Holy Ghost enlightens the mind and then captivates the will, and then preserves the affections and passions in due harmony, and conducts the life in the way of holiness--these things, I say, are difficulties in this dispensation of grace. Let us see to it, that we be in the number of those who are now creatures, and as to the way and manner in which it pleases God to bring this about we need not be at all concerned about it.²⁸

The revivalists had somewhat side-stepped the understanding and spoke of the Spirit as acting directly upon the affections. To Chauncy that would be enthusiasm and not religion. The Holy Ghost excited sincere Christians to and assisted them in the practice of their duty. He granted them support and consolation under sufferings and afflictions and brought them inward joy.²⁹

Christian joy springs from heart purifying faith, making the subjects of it humble. Christian joy observes a just decorum in the way and manner in which it expresses itself. Christian joy is in its nature a sober, rational satisfaction and delight. Laughter would indeed be too sensual a mode of expressing so Divine a passion.³⁰

There was no sympathy on the part of Chauncy with certain expressions of "holy laughter" and boisterous gladness that were manifest at many of the revival services.

Chauncy, too, looked for a change in the religious picture. "I am one of those," he said, "who look, according to the promise of God, for a more glorious state of things."³¹ The effect of such a new day in the religious life of the land would be a universal prevalence of faith, love, peace, and all the Christian graces that would transform men into a likeness to God and cause

²⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 25-26.

³¹ Ibid., p. 32.

them to be happy in the fruits of His favor. Chauncy's sermons were not altogether void of a stirring and emotional appeal.

Whether you believe it or not, you are, as sinners against the God that made you, the proper objects of Hell. Is this a condition to be easy in? Bow your knee to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, beseeching him, with a becoming importunity of soul, to have mercy upon you. Have you seen the need for Christ? Have you repaired to him as the Saviour of undone sinners? Are you becoming new men? We have reason to be seeking to God for the outpouring of His Spirit.³²

Chauncy was not complacent in the light of the sad, decadent, languishing state of religion in New England. He was looking for a revival of true primitive Christianity. He knew how to make a personal appeal to men to press into the Kingdom of God with a "holy violence." Yet such a revival would not be characterized by noise and confusion. He decried the unchristian heats and animosities that had broken out in many places, dividing and breaking in pieces the churches and the towns.

During July of 1742 James Davenport³³ had been in Boston carrying on an itinerant ministry much in the fashion of Whitefield. In lieu of the remarkable reception Whitefield had received in New England the preceding year, there had sprung up here and there men who endeavored to imitate him. The most extravagant of these had been James Davenport. Along with his preaching in the city of Boston he had called upon the ministers of the regular established churches and had inquired into the state of their conversion. Davenport's conduct had been the occasion for Chauncy's preaching a sermon, Cautioning against Enthusiasm.³⁴ A copy had been presented to Davenport in the hope that it might be a word in season and save him from the "wilds of a heated imagination."

Chauncy along with others were not so sure that Davenport had been sent of God to Boston. They feared that he would be the occasion of much hurt to the interest of religion. His manner of speech as well as what he said tended to disturb the imagination of the people rather than to inform the judgment. Davenport, they surmised, had mistaken the mechanical operations of violent voice and action for impressions of the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of conversion was liable to be brought into contempt, for "enthusi-

³²Ibid., pp. 35-39.

³³Pastor of the Church of Christ, Smith-hold, Long Island.

³⁴Chauncy, Cautioning against Enthusiasm (Boston, 1742).

astic wildness had slain its thousands."³⁵

It was granted that Davenport might plead the danger of an unconverted ministry but it was questioned as to whether he "should assume as divine prerogative and act as tho' he were a constituted judge of his brethern." Men cannot judge the hearts of others. Davenport's chief error had been his giving heed to impulses and in guiding himself by them as if they were the will of God. He was guilty of taking the notions of his own mind for divine communications. Thus Chauncy said, "I esteem it a very small thing to be judged by your judgment; and the rather because I certainly know, you are ignorant of my state towards God."³⁶ No judgment was passed upon the spiritual condition of Davenport but he was denied the right to pass judgment upon his fellowmen as to whether they had experienced a saving conversion.

After these introductory remarks made directly to Davenport in the form of a letter attached to the sermon, the whole subject of enthusiasm and its particular danger in the business of religion was thoroughly discussed. An enthusiast was one who had a "conceit of himself as a person favoured with the extraordinary presence of the Deity." He was one who had mistaken the workings of his own passions for divine communications and thus fancied himself immediately inspired by the Spirit of God. Those in whom melancholy had been "the prevailing ingredient in their constitution" were particularly prone to enthusiasm. It was the product of "a bad temperament of the blood and spirits." It was "properly a disease, a sort of madness."

Those who had been afflicted with such a madness expressed an extreme disregard for the dictates of reason. They considered themselves distinguished persons. "God himself speaks inwardly and immediately to their souls." As a consequence of such assurance, the enthusiast was "not only infinitely stiff and tenacious, but impatient of contradiction, censorious, and uncharitable."³⁷ Chauncy noted that throughout the history of the Christian Church, religious enthusiasts had gained great renown among the populace by the "extraordinary fervor of their minds, accompanied by uncommon bodily motions, and an excessive confidence and assurance." He published a pamphlet in which he gave an account of the French

³⁵ Ibid., pp. ii, iii.

³⁶ Ibid., p. vi.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

Prophets.³⁸ Such enthusiasm, a kind of religious frenzy, the fruit of a deluded imagination, was being expressed in the religious revival in New England.

Chauncy laid down a single rule whereby religious enthusiasts might be distinguished as "meer pretenders to the immediate guidance and influence of the Spirit." This measuring line of the things of the Spirit was the Bible. Enthusiasts, he asserted, showed little regard for the Scriptures and little acknowledgment that they contained the commandments of God. The Holy Spirit could not be the author of private revelations contradictory to the public standing ones. An application of this single rule to the revivals brought to light rather glaring errors. The Bible condemned setting one minister over against another. The Bible commanded Christian charity. Spiritual pride and self-conceit were condemned. Lay-exhorters and teachers in one place and another, all over the land, were contrary to the Rule. Women and girls were not permitted to speak in religious assemblies. The Apostle Paul advocated in his writings a just decorum when speaking in the house of God.³⁹

Giving way to enthusiasm, Chauncy asserted, had always reflected dishonor upon the Spirit of God. It had been a source of infinite evil and was a great enemy to real and solid religion.

Get a true understanding of the proper work of the Spirit. The Spirit prepares men's minds for the grace of God, by true humiliation, from an apprehension of sin, and the necessity of a Saviour.

The work of the Spirit does not consist in giving men private revelations, sudden impulses and impressions, in immediate calls and extraordinary missions. You must become acquainted with the Bible and what it makes the work of the Holy Ghost.⁴⁰

Religion cannot be placed in the heat and fervor of the passions. A holy frame of soul and a conversation becoming the Gospel were the fruits of the Spirit. Enthusiastic wildness, confusion, and noise were related in no way to the influence of the Holy Ghost.

On August 4, 1742, Chauncy wrote a letter to Mr. George Wishart, a minister in Edinburgh, Scotland, concerning the state of religion in New England. His purpose in sending the letter was to refute certain errors and wrong impressions of religion in

³⁸ Chauncy, A Wonderful Narrative, or a Faithful Account of the French Prophets, Their Agitations, Ecstasies, &c. (Boston, 1742).

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 7-15.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

New England that were being sent to Scotland by the revivalists. The letter was published in Edinburgh.⁴¹ It stated that Whitefield had been characterized in Boston as "the angel flying through heaven with the everlasting Gospel," while those who opposed him were stigmatized as enemies of God and true religion.⁴² As a matter of fact, Chauncy asserted Whitefield's coming had only succeeded in arousing the passions of the people, especially of the young people and especially of the "females among them." There was much talk of religion with a "disposition to be perpetually hearing sermons, to the neglect of all other business."

Yet with all the talk about religion the town was showing little reformation in respect to the things that needed reforming. There was the same pride and vanity, the same luxury and intemperance, the same lying and tricking and cheating as before. The friends of Whitefield were much puffed up with conceit and pride. Gilbert Tennent was mentioned as an imitator of Whitefield and one who had come a distance of three hundred miles to preach in Boston where there were fourteen ministers. This was a bare-faced affront to the Boston ministry. Tennent was characterized as a man of no great parts or learning and who preached in "the extemporaneous way, with much noise and little connection." An awkward imitator of Whitefield, Tennent turned off his hearers with "mere stuff."

In the course of the letter Chauncy decried Whitefield's doctrine of inward feelings. Such a doctrine produced a type of preaching that contained "little digested and connected good sense." Religion, Chauncy held, had little to do with the physical manifestations that characterized the revivals. The causes were natural and not divine.

The speaker delivers himself with the greatest vehemence both of voice and gesture, and in the most frightful language his genius will allow of. If this has its intended effect upon one or two weak women, the shrieks catch from one to another, till a great part of the congregation is affected.⁴³

Environmental factors also played a part for it was usually late at night, with only a few candles in a Meeting-House, that there was such screaming and shrieking to the greatest degree; the persons most affected generally being young people, the children, and

⁴¹Chauncy, A Letter from a Gentleman in Boston (Edinburgh, 1742).

⁴²Ibid., p. 8.

⁴³Ibid., pp. 12-13.

the women.⁴⁴

He noted the great variety of opinion expressed about the revivals. Some thought it a wonderful work of God's grace; others as only an expression of a spirit of enthusiasm. Some saw in the revival a great deal of religion, while others saw only an extravaganza with some small mixture of good in it. Some thought that the country had never been in a happier state on a religious account while others thought it had never been worse. Chauncy said, "For myself, I am among those who are clearly in the opinion, that there never was such a spirit of superstition and enthusiasm reigning in the land before; never such gross disorders and bare-faced affronts to common decency; never such scandalous reproaches to the Blessed Spirit, making him the Author of the great irregularities and confusions; yet I am of the opinion also, that the appearances among us (so much out of the ordinary way, and so unaccountable to persons not acquainted with the history of the world) have been the means of awakening the attention of many; and a good number I hope, have settled into a truly Christian temper: tho' I must add, at the same time, that I am far from thinking that the appearance in general, is any other than the effect of enthusiastick heat."⁴⁵ The good had been little more than "a commotion on the passions" and the end would probably be "Quakerism and infidelity."

In 1743 Chauncy's chief work appeared, a summary of all his arguments against the revival.⁴⁶ This was, undoubtedly the most influential document in opposition to the Great Awakening. Characteristic of his method Chauncy began with a positive assertion of what he believed to be a true work of God, basing his argument upon Scripture, reason, and experience. He came out strongly for the supreme position of the Bible in God's program of salvation. The "Old Lights" held this position with the utmost faith and tenacity. In the revival movement they sensed a threat to this cherished and sacred doctrine.

Creation, redemption, and conversion were true works of God. Conversion in particular was a secret thing within man. The revivalists claimed to know too much about it. The good life was the proper testimony to a regenerate heart. The work of God was

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 15.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 20-21.

⁴⁶Chauncy, Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England.

the same in all places. The manner and means whereby God worked might be varied but the effect upon the human heart was always the same. The emphasis the revivalists were placing upon the varied manifestations of the awakening as an argument for a work of God upon the heart did not impress Chauncy.

True sorrow for sin was also a sign of a true work of God but it did not arise from a contemplation and dread of Hell. It came alone from seeing, with the eye of faith, sin wounding Christ. "An eye to Christ is the only Gospel ground of a Gospel repentance. The curse of the Law and the wrath of God only alarm the conscience and distract the sinner." The fruits of God's work were peace and the effect of righteousness was quietness and assurance. The work of God in a man's heart made him mild and gentle, disposing him to behave himself toward his fellowmen with all tenderness, loving them as himself.⁴⁷ The least spark of true Christian charity was a better evidence of a work of God than the greatest ability to show signs and wonders.⁴⁸ If great numbers in the towns were being effectually wrought upon by God's Spirit, it ought to appear in their ceasing to do evil and in their learning to do well. They ought to become better men and it would be visible that they were such. Wrath, strife, emulation, pride, sedition, and schism would not be found among such.⁴⁹

In attacking the revival movement, Chauncy's motive was not simply to destroy. He did not make his criticism because he was biased, prejudiced, or jealous. As he criticized another house, he was not a man without a dwelling place of considerable beauty. Entering the sanctuary of his mind, one is strangely warmed and better able to understand why he was constrained to speak out against the grotesque features of a budding development in the religious life of the land. Even though he opposed the revival, he made an invaluable contribution in pointing out what was unlovely and unworthy of that which bore the name of Christ.

In pointing out the things of a bad and dangerous tendency as they appeared to him in the Great Awakening in New England, Chauncy set the pattern for almost all the objections that were made in later periods of opposition. The first objection pertained to itinerant preaching. The rise of this practice was attributed to Whitefield. With a clever English note the itinerant preacher

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 33.

was charged with "non-residence," absent from his charge seven-eighths of the time, and with "pluralism," acting as if all the parishes in the country were his proper cure. Chauncy characterized him further as a "busy-body"--one who played the bishop in another's Diocese.⁵⁰ "What is the language of this going into another man's parish? Is it not obviously this? The settled pastors are men, not qualified for their office, or not faithful in the execution of it."⁵¹ The itinerants appeared to have an overfond opinion of themselves, and an unchristian one of their brethren. They insinuated suspicion against the fixed pastors, preached against them, and prayed for them as "poor, carnal, unconverted men."

Itinerancy tended to promote confusion and disorder in the churches. The Cambridge Synod of 1648 was quoted in respect to the rule for church order. "That elders are appointed to feed not all flocks, but the particular flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made them overseers; and that flock they must attend, even the whole flock: and one congregation being as much as an ordinary elder can attend, therefore there is no greater church than a congregation, which may ordinarily meet in one place."⁵² Congregations were dividing over the revival issue, a divisive factor that struck hard at the Puritan zeal for uniformity. The validity of the ordination of the itinerant preachers was questioned. Increase Mather in his Order of the Church in New England Vindicated, had said:

May a man be ordained a pastor except to a particular church? No man ought to be ordained a pastor except to a particular church. It is the common received opinion among the Divines of the day that the election of a minister by a church shall precede his ordination.

Chauncy believed that all of the best men and the best churches were against the pernicious practice. It was esteemed "an argument of pride and self-conceit." The restraint of ecclesiastical authority was being laid upon it as far as possible. Legislation in Connecticut and petitions drawn up in Massachusetts voiced opposition to the itinerant preacher.

One of the most spectacular aspects of the revivals were the bodily manifestations. These were particularly offensive to Chauncy. They were in utter conflict with his principle of the uniform effect of the work of God's Spirit upon man's heart. To

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 42. ⁵¹Ibid., pp. 50-51. ⁵²Ibid., p. 52.

him they were not the work of God's Spirit but the effect of natural influence brought about by awful words and frightful gestures; a mere mechanical impression on animal nature. Many times they were produced by the wild extravagant conduct of some "over-heated" preacher.⁵³ There was a prevalence of these manifestations among children, young people, and women whose passions were soft and tender and easily thrown into a commotion. The following quotation was from the Boston Post-Boy:

The terrible language of the itinerants frequently frights the little children and sets them screaming; and that frights their tender mothers and sets them a screaming, and by degrees spreads over a great part of the congregation: and forty, fifty, an hundred of them screaming altogether makes such an awful and hideous noise as will make a man's hair stand on end. Some will faint away, fall down upon the floor, wallow and foam. Some women rend off their caps, handkerchiefs, and other clothes, tear their hair down about their ears and seem perfectly bereft of their reason.⁵⁴

Chauncy distinguished between fear produced by the effect of truth impressed upon the mind and fear arising from an affrighted imagination. The effective work of God's Spirit was upon the mind, an enlightening Spirit. Satan worked upon the reason by means of the passions; the Spirit upon the passions by means of reason.

There was the dangerous tendency to place the visible manifestations in Christ's stead and thus to cast reproach upon Him. Richard Baxter was quoted. "Think not that you can satisfy the justice of the Law or merit anything of God, by the worth of your sorrows; tho' you should weep even tears of blood."⁵⁵ Chauncy believed that the sense of sin did express itself in bitter remorse of conscience. The Spirit's operation in convincing sinners was not to be doubted, but caution must be exercised in distinguishing between those fears and their effects that were from the Spirit and those that might have arisen from other causes.⁵⁶

A third danger was "that sudden light and joy as many of late claim to be subject of." A distinction must be made between true and false joy. The foundation of true joy was the faith that embraced Christ upon "Gospel terms"; a renewed heart and life. The joy of many affected by the revivals appeared to be little more than a sudden flash, a spark of their own kindling, a mere sensitive passion. There was too much ostentation and too much savor-

⁵³Ibid., p. 99.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 106.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 113.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 110.

ing of a desire to be seen of men. Singing in the streets and on the ferry boats, raptures and transports, swoonings and out-cries, clapping of hands and breaking out in hearty laughter were poor evidence to Chauncy that joy in the Lord possessed the hearts of the revivalists. It all savored too much of levity in matters that were of infinite and eternal moment. Rather than joy it was more an expression of a "warm imagination."

A spirit of rash, censorious, and uncharitable judging was representative of another dangerous tendency in the revival movement. People were prejudiced against the standing ministers. Chauncy remarked of the appearance of this first in the preaching of Whitefield. "He fears many, nay, the most part that preach do not experimentally know Christ."⁵⁷ Yet Chauncy felt that the body of ministers in New England were "a set of men, as sound in the faith, and of as good a life, as any part of the Christian world was favored with."⁵⁸ In reference to Whitefield having judged Archbishop Tillotson as having no more true Christianity than Mahomet it was said: "Will Mr. Whitefield so far assume to himself the prerogative of the Son of God as to determine, that the things contained in the Archbishop's writings are absolutely inconsistent with an upright heart, a sincere desire to know and do the will of God?"⁵⁹ Excuse, however, was offered for Whitefield as he had been young in years and Christian experience and of "a raw acquaintance" with Divinity.

The "Nottingham Sermon" of Gilbert Tennent was offered as further evidence of a censorious and uncharitable spirit. In the course of the sermon Tennent had said:

The ministers be swarms of locusts and crowds of Pharisees who resemble the old Pharisees as one crow's egg does another. It is true, some of the modern Pharisees have learned to prate a little more orthodoxly about the New-Birth, than their predecessor Nicodemus, who are, in the mean time, as great strangers of the feeling experience of it as he.⁶⁰

Itinerants going about with such a manifest spirit had sown seeds of discord and dissension in the midst of the churches. When a settled pastor was judged by them to be unconverted, the members of his church were urged to draw part from him and to seek out a converted ministry. Not much imagination is needed to realize the impact of such a practice upon the minds of the New England

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 141.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 142.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 143.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 149.

clergy and the concurrent reaction. It bore fruit in engendered strife and contention, causing separation and schism in the churches. While preaching in New Haven, Davenport had declared of the minister there that "thousands are now cursing him in Hell for being the instrument of their damnation." Davenport became unbalanced from the intense excitement and uncontrolled emotionalism of the revival meetings. Boston prosecuted him for slandering the clergy and a court in Connecticut declared him insane. To Chauncy such uncharitable judging was an invasion of God's prerogative, an exercise of unjust jurisdiction over His servants, "a power we have no right or business to use."

A further danger was the "regard to impulses and impressions which had prevailed among too many." Many of the revival preachers and those touched by the awakening tended to "take the motion of their own minds for something divinely extraordinary, or to put constructions upon common occurrences, which there is no ground for but in their own imaginations."⁶¹ This he illustrated by a quotation from Whitefield's Account of His Life.

One day perceiving an uncommon Drought, and a noisome Clamminess in my Mouth, and using Things to allay my Thirst, but in vain; It was suggested to me, that, when Jesus Christ cried out, I Thirst, his Sufferings were near over. Upon this I throw myself upon the Bed, crying out, I Thirst, I Thirst. Soon after I perceived my Load to go off: a Spirit of Mourning was taken from me, and I knew what it was truly to rejoice in the Lord.⁶²

Such an insistence upon the immediate feeling of the Spirit, Chauncy believed, led to the danger of a deluded or over-heated imagination. Davenport had been persuaded that he possessed an immediate revelation from the Spirit that the Kingdom of God was coming among them with power. Further he felt that he had an extraordinary call to labor in its advancement. Chauncy doubted the validity of such a revelation and maintained that God used His regularly instituted means in such work.

The influence of the Spirit did not consist in sudden impulses and impressions, in visions, revelations, extraordinary missions and the like. The spirit works in a way agreeable to our make as reasonable creatures, by his blessing on the instituted means for the accomplishment of these purposes of mercy.⁶³

A presumptuous dependence upon the Spirit had led many to dispise learning, oppose the diligent use of the appointed means,

⁶¹Ibid., p. 178.

⁶²Ibid., pp. 179-80.

⁶³Ibid., p. 218.

and to reflect dishonor upon the written Word of God. Scripture no longer appeared with them to be the rule. Rather they substituted for the Scriptures the supposed dictates of the Spirit immediately experienced. They spoke contemptuously of the Bible as if it was a dead letter and of little worth for the unconverted to consult.⁶⁴ Yet it was the Spirit who spoke in the Scriptures. "Such ought to be recurred to as the only sure Rule in matters of religion."⁶⁵

Chauncy disliked the appearance of the many lay exhorters, particularly women and children. They represented those "who abide not in their own ability or calling and throw the body of Christ into great disorder." "When unqualified and uncalled persons undertake such a work, out of the concert of pride of their hearts or are allured to it by crafty design of erroneous teachers, partly to overthrow a publick, regular, and standing ministry in the churches, this is a practice I here censure, which like a Trojan Horse, hath sent forth multitudes of erroneous persons into the city of God, to infest and defile it."⁶⁶ The worship services were disorderly with much talking, praying, laughing, handshaking, kissing, and screaming. Such decorum was contrary to all decency and was an offense to God.

Since to the mind of Chauncy the revival contained disorders that were destructive of peace, holiness, and truth, he felt that he could not remain silent. "Such a day as this when error in doctrine and practice cover the land, we dare not be silent."⁶⁷ To him these errors were not "speculative niceties, nor matters of doubtful disputation, but evident breaches upon the law of faith, of the rule of duty, and in instances of high importance."⁶⁸ He felt particularly called upon to make a stand for the "good old way." Quoting from Luther in respect to the duty of ministers, he said, "In a time of peace it is their duty to teach; in a time of war, to fight with and resist Satan and erroneous man."⁶⁹ Harking back to the day when Luther opposed the enthusiasts at Wittenburg and the fathers of New England met the Antinomian crisis, Chauncy felt that the revival disorders must be met with a similar spirit. "Good order is the strength and beauty of the world. . . .the prosperity both of the church

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 266. ⁶⁵Ibid., p. 267. ⁶⁶Ibid., p. 233.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 336. ⁶⁸Ibid., p. 336. ⁶⁹Ibid., p. 338.

and the state very much depend upon it."⁷⁰

Many of the clergy were unsettled in their thoughts concerning the revival and others, for fear of losing their jobs, "being possessed of men-pleasing dispositions," had not spoken out against it. The Apostles themselves had set the example for Chauncy and he was constrained to oppose the confusion and noise. He would become the champion of the Bible over against enthusiasm and religious impulse in a time of sudden flame and burning flax in the great business of salvation. He had no fear of the persecution that might be his lot. "The gentlemen who are most free in speaking of others as opposers of God's works, seem to look upon themselves as the only friends the Lord Jesus Christ has in the land."⁷¹ Such spiritual pride merited only contempt and not fear.

Chauncy held that little was to be gained and much to be lost in the business of calling people names. Very rarely if ever did he stoop to such procedure in his controversial writings. Moderation was continually urged on the part of all those, who with him, opposed the Great Awakening. Some had complained against the revival when they possessed no adequate factual material to substantiate their conclusions. Others were too warm in their expressed opposition. Some looked upon the revival as a rather humorous situation and joked about the various physical manifestations. Others lived too worldly lives to be in any way adequate judges.⁷² Chauncy, himself, had been classified by some as a man of Arminian, Pelagian, and Deistical principles, destitute of all serious sense of religion, loose in his living, and no real friend to the power of Godliness. In answer, Chauncy said that such controversial behaviour might excite the passions and provoke the wrath, but it could never instruct the understanding or alter sentiments.⁷³

In the presentation of suggestions that might prove to be expedient in the promotion of the interest of religion, Chauncy revealed himself as a man of exemplary fairness and charitable-ness. "This is an important head of discourse, and would have required enlargement but that many things are well said upon it by Mr. Edwards in his late book (Tho'ts on the Revival) which if he,

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 366.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 393.

⁷² Ibid., p. 406.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 399.

and I, and others, would carefully attend to, it might do much toward putting an end to our present difficulties."⁷⁴ There should be a confession of faults on both sides and meekness and forbearance should be the order of the day. It should be a time of prayer and not one of strife. Proper concern should be shown by all for the regulation of the educational institutions that they might be in all ways "nurseries of piety." As much emphasis if not more should be given to the moral duties of religion as well as those of an external nature.

After rather general suggestions Chauncy stated what were to him some of a more particular nature. First of all a stop must be put to itinerant preaching. This was the true cause of most of the disorder. He suggested that it might be stopped by an association of ministers agreeing to close their pulpits to such preachers. "Raw, unqualified persons" ought not be permitted in the pulpits of the regular churches. It was pointed out that for some time the churches of New England had been careless and negligent in respect to ministerial candidates. In harmony with a suggested program of forty years previous at a convention of Boston ministers, Chauncy proposed that each candidate have a testimonial from the hands of at least four or five pastors. Such a testimonial would indicate that he had passed a satisfactory examination by these men. It would indicate that he possessed a blameless life and his reasons for entering the ministry. There would be evidence that he was satisfactorily acquainted with the 'three learned languages and with the sciences commonly taught in the educational institutions of the day. He must preach a satisfactory probationary sermon and demonstrate his ability to lead in prayer. The theological works that he had read would be listed and he would need to demonstrate his ability to refute error. There should be further evidence that he adhered to the confession of faith agreed to by the churches of New England and the Assembly of Divines at Westminster.⁷⁵ The adoption of such a program would put a stop to itinerancy and raise the standard of the ministry.

Again Chauncy warned the churches to guard against a wrong use of the passions. "Passions are abused when they run before the understanding, or when they rise higher towards any particular object than judgment directs."⁷⁶ Many, he insisted, were letting

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 408.

⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 416-17.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 419.

their passions rise high and grow warm about the lesser things of religion, while they were cold and indifferent about matters of higher importance. Passion was producing quarrels and divisions in the churches. Overwrought emotions were causing men and women to lose their balance and to neglect their businesses and proper callings. "There is a religion of judgment, understanding, and the will as well as of the affections." The final suggestion was in the nature of an appeal to all the churches to reinstate the strictest kind of discipline, which had been allowed to languish.

During 1744 and 1745 letters were exchanged by Chauncy and Whitefield. Both were very gracious and courteous to each other though both were equally convinced of the rightness of their respective positions. Chauncy contended that Whitefield could not justify his itinerancy on Scriptural grounds and that he was guilty of spiritual pride and "too self-satisfied with the Hosannas of the multitude." When Whitefield returned to Boston in 1745, he chanced to meet Chauncy in the street where the following conversation took place:

"So you have returned, Dr. Whitefield, have you?"

"Yes, Reverend Sir, in the service of the Lord," purred the revivalist.

"I am sorry to hear it," snapped Chauncy.

"So is the Devil," Whitefield replied.⁷⁷

There was no doubt about the spirit of antagonism that existed between the two men.

Although Chauncy was representative of the liberal trend in religion in New England, he possessed a characteristic attitude of antagonism to innovation of any kind on the part of any particular established society whether civil or religious. A religious sectionalism began to develop in New England with the coming of Whitefield whose preaching was particularly effective on the frontier. Those who introduce innovations into an established society are sure to clash with the established order. This factor enters rather largely into the clash between Chauncy and Whitefield. A popular movement such as the revival was rather irritating to Chauncy, a member of Boston's aristocratic society. The revival movement appeared to him as a "kind of invasion of the sacred prerogative belonging to the clerical party of the regular

⁷⁷ Clifford K. Shipton, Sibley's Harvard Graduates (Boston, 1942), VI, 444.

and established churches of Massachusetts. Lay exhorters from among the lower elements of society were an affront to the dignity of the Christian ministry. Chauncy, the aristocratic minister of Boston's oldest and most elite church, could not but frown upon the democracy of revivalism.

In addition to his own writings against the Great Awakening, Chauncy edited practically every attack upon the revival which the Boston press issued. He complained that he "could have printed more flagrant accounts, if his Intelligencers would have allow'd him." So great were his efforts that his health broke under the strain and he was compelled to travel for awhile.

In reality Chauncy provided an important commentary on the early revivals in American Christianity by means of his opposition. The positive restraints of Scripture, reason, and experience so clearly set forth in his writings were helpful in curbing the more extravagant expressions of revivalistic religion. He was not an enemy to a dynamic religious faith. He simply questioned the worth of revivalism as an instrument to bring about a vital religious life in the land. To him it was a spurious type of religious expression unrelated to the Divinely instituted life of the Christian Church.







